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Among those at Senate hearing on C.I.A. surveillance were Thomas Abernathy, Howard Osborn, John Glennon and Gordon Stewart. They discussed the opening of mails.

C.I.A. 'MAIL COVER' PUT AT 2.7 MILLION

215,820 of Letters Opened
During a 20-Year Program,
Senate Panel Is Told

By NICHOLAS M. HORROCK

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 21—The Central Intelligence Agency opened more than 215,000 pieces of mail in a New York operation that many senior agency officials knew to be illegal, it was disclosed today at a Senate committee hearing. Testimony and documents introduced before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence sketched a program of intrusion upon the United States mails far more extensive than was indicated in the Rockefeller Commission report on the intelligence community last June or in previous Congressional testimony.

Figures made available to the committee by the C.I.A. showed that it photographed the exterior of 2,705,726 pieces of mail to and from the Soviet Union in its New York program between 1953 and 1973. His testimony established, however, that there was one in every 13 pieces of mail to and from the Soviet Union. The agency opened

Similar operations were conducted on the West Coast in Hawaii and in New Orleans, but all were of shorter duration. No figures were given for these operations.

Two C.I.A. internal investigations of the New York mail project, one in 1960 and the other in 1969, found the operation of little intelligence value, the men who conducted the reviews testified.

Gordon Stewart, Inspector General of the C.I.A. in 1969, said that his office was "quite surprised to find such an endeavor going on" and that, after an internal investigation, he recommended that the project be turned over to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which was receiving a large portion of the intelligence information.

Mr. Stewart and John Glennon, and Thomas Abernathy, former staff members in the Inspector General's Office, said they believed the project was illegal. Moreover, Mr. Glennon testified, "obviously everyone [involved in it at the C.I.A.] realized it was illegal."

As early as 1962, the C.I.A. became concerned that the mail opening might inadvertently be made public and it devised cover stories for those involved, according to agency documents.

'Police Contacts' Cited

"As an example of additional safeguards to the project," one memorandum said, "high-level police contacts with the New York City Police Department are enjoyed, which would preclude any uncontrolled inquiry in the event police action was indicated."

A committee source said there was no evidence that the New York police knew about the illegal mail opening.

The 20-year project appeared to pick up speed in the late nineteen-fifties and again in the early nineteen-seventies. During these periods, figures indicated, the C.I.A. was examining peak numbers of mail items, and between 1970 and 1972 averaged about 2 million a year.

According to C.I.A. memorandums, the project was originally proposed to postal officials as one in which the C.I.A. would only photograph the outside of envelopes—in effect, a "mail cover." New York was selected because that was where mail to the Soviet Union was funneled.

Subsequently, by the mid-nineteen-fifties, large numbers of letters were being opened, but it was unclear whether postal officials or Attorneys General were fully informed.

According to testimony, members of the C.I.A.'s Office of Security chose mail at random from the traffic between the United States and the Soviet Union, as well as looking for letters of certain persons. More than 25 million letters were routed to the Soviet Union during the period.

There was no direct testimony on how the mail was opened, but intelligence sources said that the C.I.A. at first used a steam system, but later developed an oven that "baked" the letters open. After the mail was opened, the contents were photographed and the letters were resealed and sent on their way.

It was unclear whether the C.I.A. obtained approval over the years from Postmasters General or Attorneys General.

One memorandum made public today indicated that Richard M. Helms, former Director of Central Intelligence, had briefed Edward Day, Postmaster General in 1961, and that Mr. Day permitted the project to continue but "he did not want to be informed in any greater detail on the handling."

According to the Rockefeller Commission report, Mr. Helms briefed Attorney General John N. Mitchell and Postmaster General Winton Blount in 1971, and they fully "concurred."

In its report, the Rockefeller Commission said at one point that "some 8,700 items were opened and the contents analyzed"; at another point, it said the project had "expanded by 1959 to include the opening of over 13,000 letters a year." But at no point did the commission make public the total numbers of letters involved.

Testimony before other Congressional committees and the select committee had established earlier that the mail program intruded upon the mail of Senators, Representatives and other public officials, including Senator Frank Church, Democrat of Idaho. Mr. Church is chairman of the Senate select committee.

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